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### Writer's Block: Why Punctuation Matters, Part Two

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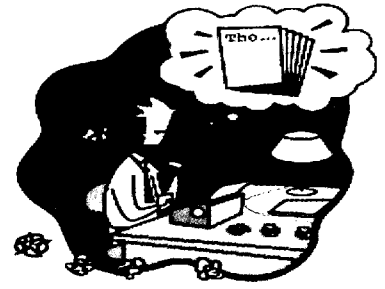
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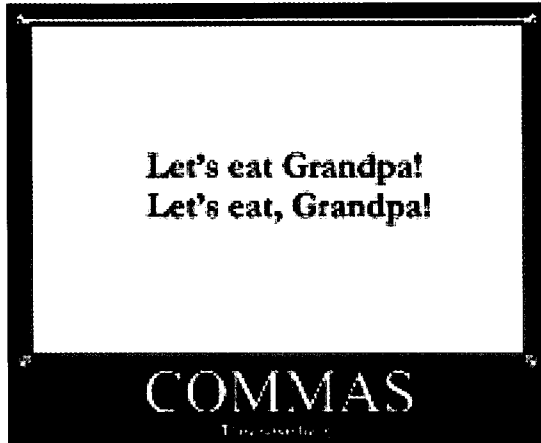
# WRITER'S BLOCK

## WHY PUNCTUATION MATTERS: PART TWO

BY DAVID H. SPRATT



Commas save lives! I know it is mind-boggling, but I recently learned this surprising fact after seeing this anonymous poster online:



Several months ago in this column, I began a sporadic series called "Why Punctuation Matters." In the first column, I provided a "refresher" on basic apostrophe and possessive rules. At the end of the column, I promised to discuss comma usage in a future column, and I know you have been waiting with breathless anticipation for this conversation.

Some lawyers are "good" with commas; others struggle with them daily. Many of my students, who would tell you they are "good" with commas, quote a long-ago learned "rule" that is actually NOT a rule: use a comma whenever you would pause when speaking. Given that my students likely learned about commas more recently than most people reading this column, I reckon that covering the basic rules will help all but the most die-hard grammarians among us (and I know there are some of you out there).

### 1. Use a comma to separate items in a series.

#### Example:

**Professor Spratt rambled to his readers about grammar, punctuation, and proofreading.**

The comma before the last item in a series is called a serial comma (in the above example, the serial comma is the comma before the word "and"); the conventional wisdom these days is to include the serial comma before the last item in a series. Your fondness or extreme hatred for the serial comma probably stems from where you grew up and your undergraduate major or previous work experience. If you have a background as a journalist or non-legal writer, more than likely you omit the serial comma. A couple of years ago, however, a good friend told me that in legal writing the law-trained reader uses punctuation as a guidepost—each comma separates a different item in a series, perhaps to designate individual elements in a rule, discrete contractual obligations, and the like. Consider the following non-legal example:

**For lunch today, I brought the following items: ham, crackers, macaroni and cheese.**

How many items did I bring for lunch today? If I brought three items (ham, crackers, and macaroni and cheese), then the above example is unambiguous (and my good friend, who happens to be a freak for macaroni and cheese, would be much happier). If I brought four items (ham, crackers, macaroni, and cheese), however, the above example is ambiguous (and my friend would not try to eat my lunch). In most legal writing, ambiguity should be avoided—embrace the serial comma to provide the clarity our profession demands.

### 2. Use a comma to separate two independent clauses connected by a coordinating conjunction.

#### Example:

**It is June 1, and my column deadline has passed.**

An independent clause has its own subject and verb, and it can stand alone as a sentence. A coordinating conjunction joins parts of a sentence that are grammatically similar. There are seven coordinating conjunctions (and, but, for, nor, or, so, and yet). Note that because is not listed as a coordinating conjunction.

If you use a comma to separate two parts of a sentence that would not otherwise be independent clauses, then you have created a comma splice.

#### Incorrect Comma Usage Example:

**It is June 1, my column deadline has passed.**

Comma splices are independent sentences that are incorrectly run together into a single sentence, joined by a comma. Usually comma splices can be corrected by a semi-colon, a coordinating conjunction (and, or, nor, yet, but, so, for), or a period.

#### Correct Examples:

**It is June 1; my column deadline has passed.**

**It is June 1, and my column deadline has passed.**

**It is June 1. My column deadline has passed.**

### 3. Use a comma to set off long introductory clauses from the rest of the sentence.

#### Examples:

**After you finish reading this column, you will need a glass of wine.**

**According to most writing professors, correct comma usage is a lofty goal.**

If an introductory phrase is short, you can omit the comma.

### 4. Use commas in the middle of a sentence to set off information that is not essential to the meaning of the sentence—i.e., commas should set off non-restrictive phrases.

#### Example:

**Professor Spratt, boring his readers with minute details of comma usage, is almost done with this column.**

The point of the above sentence is that I am almost finished with the column. The phrase "boring his readers with minute details of comma usage" is an aside, a non-restrictive phrase that can be deleted without changing the basic meaning of the sentence.

A comma should not be used to set off restrictive phrases—phrases that contain information critical to the meaning of a sentence.

#### Example:

**The lady wearing a red dress hit my car.**

The phrase "wearing a red dress" is critical to the meaning of the sentence as it identifies the specific person who hit my car.

As promised, the column is now ending. Hopefully, I provided you with a useful kernel or two. As always, questions, comments, or suggestions are welcomed (even encouraged)! **Note the correct use of the serial comma in the previous sentence!** Yes, I am a grammar nerd. Enjoy your summer!

David H. Spratt is a professor at The American University, Washington College of Law, where he teaches Legal Rhetoric, Introduction to Advocacy, and Family Law Practice and Drafting. Professor Spratt practiced family law for 10 years and is a former chair of the VBA Domestic Relations Section.